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"Yemen on the Brink: Implications for U.S. Policy"

U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Wednesday, February 3, 2010; 9:30 a.m.
Rayburn House Office Building, Room 2172

The Committee on Foreign Affairs held a hearing entitled "Yemen on the Brink: Implications for U.S. Policy," in which two State Department officials briefed the committee on the U.S. government's current progress in Yemen.

Chairman **Howard L. Berman** (D-CA) made opening remarks mentioning the Fort Hood shooting and the failed Christmas Day attack, followed by a brief overview on the current conditions in Yemen. Ranking member **Ileana Ros-Lehtinen** (R-FL) also made some remarks, focusing on al-Qaeda's presence in Yemen. "It is no accident that al-Qaeda has found a home in Yemen." Ros-Lehtinen said that a small group controls much of Yemen's wealth, which relies on oil revenues, and that "al-Qaeda is now targeting the Yemeni state." Her main question for the State Department officials was whether or not the Yemeni government has really changed its attitude toward al-Qaeda and **whether the U.S. now truly has a partner in the Yemeni government.**

The first State Department witness was Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs, **Jeffrey Feltman** (former U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon). Feltman began his testimony by mentioning that the London conference last week -- which met to discuss Yemen and Afghanistan -- reaffirmed the goal of a "peaceful, prosperous" Yemen. The first point he made was that **Yemen has been a top U.S. priority since the administration first took office more than a year ago.** Feltman said that the U.S. is committed to a "two-pronged" strategy in Yemen which involves "bolstering and supporting Yemen on the security side" as well as supporting its governance and economy.

His second point was that **the U.S. is not alone in the fight to improve Yemen's situation.** "The international community is well aware that it must help Yemen address its challenges" both in the short term and long term. His third point was that **the U.S. is "realistic about the capabilities of our Yemeni partner."** Feltman said the U.S. should be encouraged by recent steps the Yemeni government has taken and will be supporting all kinds of reforms - including better human rights protections in Yemen.

The second witness was Principal Deputy Coordinator for Counterterrorism at the Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism at the State Department - **Robert Godec** (former U.S. ambassador to Tunisia). Godec agreed with Feltman and stressed that the Obama administration was seriously engaged with Yemen since the beginning of its term. He also agreed that the two-pronged strategy that Feltman presented "will also address the longer-term issues in Yemen." He said **these issues require a close cooperation of regional allies "and it also requires hard work."** Godec said that the U.S. is consulting with the Yemeni government to help it identify further security needs and mentioned that many U.S. officials have traveled to Yemen within the last year in order to work on these challenges.

Godec also made positive remarks on the role the Yemeni government is playing in combating the al-Qaeda threat in its territory saying that **it has significantly increased its pressure on al-Qaeda**. He reaffirmed Feltman's thoughts on the regional and international allies the U.S is working with and stressed that **"international cooperation is fundamental"** and will require us to engage with our partners. "We look forward to continue working with congress and this committee specifically," he said.

Chairman Berman opened up the committee's questioning period asking what kinds of things threaten the continued Yemeni commitment to fighting al-Qaeda alongside the U.S. "Let's be frank," Feltman responded. "Yemen has been an inconsistent partner in the past." However, he said that we should be encouraged by the determination the government of Yemen has shown. **"We believe the government of Yemen fully understands its threat now."**

Ranking Member Ros-Lehtinen asked about the increase in aid to Yemen for the next fiscal year, noting that it will be increased by \$106 million - more than six times from the 2008 fiscal year - and whether or not the Yemeni government has the capability to absorb such a large increase in funds. Feltman responded that the money was to be used for supporting the people, and said that at the London conference, **the international community decided it needed to work together in sending a unified message to Yemen about what we should expect from the money being sent to them,** as well as about building transparency and the capacity of the government.

Vice Chair **Gary L. Ackerman** (D-NY) asked the officials what was being done in order to assure that Saudi Arabia would play a serious role in helping Yemen and "be part of the real solution, not just throwing money into it," since they are so much closer to Yemen and should have a vested interest in a safe Yemen. Feltman responded that the U.S. government agrees with this strategy and will continue working to develop it.

Rep. Jeff Flake (R-AZ) asked the officials what is being done by the U.S. government in Yemen that wasn't being done before. **Feltman replied that while the administration has been dedicated to Yemen from the beginning of its administration, it now has the ability to engage regional and international partners because of the recent failed attack on Christmas.** He insisted the failed attack didn't "wake up the U.S....but it did allow us to use the international community in new ways."

A second panel followed the State Department officials, including **Christopher Boucek** from Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, **Leslie Campbell** from the National Democratic Institute, **Bruce Riedel** from the Brookings Institute, and **Jonathan Schanzer** from the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.